

Pay As You Go

Traffic, along with the many problems it causes, has surely joined Benjamin Franklin's "death and taxes" as one of life's few certainties – at least in large urban areas. Istanbul, the historic Constantinople and fabled Byzantium, and one of three European Capitals of Culture for the year 2010, has grave traffic problems caused by an antiquated road system (and the resultant new construction required) combined with far too many vehicles driven thoughtlessly and selfishly. This situation results in nearly constant traffic violations leading to road hazards, delays, and road rage. The best solution, given the short time remaining before the influx of EU luminaries and tourists, involves two incisive steps: raise the schedule of fines and penalties so that the cost of rule-breaking becomes prohibitive, and institute a system which virtually ensures enforcement of the penalties.

In order both to deter traffic law violators and to keep repeat offenders off the roads, laws must be passed to increase all fines and penalties to a level which clearly intimidates drivers into submission and severely punishes them for their transgressions. Stationary and moving violations should incur massive fines with long-lasting repercussions. Exorbitantly high amounts, for example the equivalent of a month's income for an average Turkish family of four, could be imposed for serious violations not involving personal or property damage. Vehicles should be impounded and driving privileges curtailed until the fine is completely paid. For multiple violations or scofflaws, driver's licenses should be summarily suspended or permanently revoked, with vehicle titles reverting to the municipality. The system of punishments should be artfully designed and publicized so that it will obviously be far more cost-effective to obey the

law than to speed, and then double-park, so as to arrive on time for lunch near the Grand Bazaar, for example. Immediately following a short breaking-in period to raise awareness of the newly enacted draconian penalties, traffic police using all available manpower and equipment should monitor as many roadways as possible twenty-four hours a day; their aim is to identify, stop, and properly cite all law-breakers, and deliver them to their fate.

Since traffic laws and penalties that already exist are, at best, ignored, an effective plan to assure consistent enforcement of these new laws must be put into action. Currently, drivers know they have only a slight chance of being stopped, and that even then, they can probably bribe the underpaid officer and drive off scot-free. Thus, a monetary incentive is needed to make enforcing the law more attractive to the enforcers. A bounty system, a percentage of the spoils, perhaps, a bonus for quantity over quality, or a quick route to promotion and retirement, will surely motivate the Istanbul traffic police to do what they are paid to do. More than just a simple retention of lax habits from the time when vehicles were scarce and problems fewer, the current Turkish attitude towards driving is remarkably macho-Byzantine. A vehicle, including the driver and all passengers and cargo, is perceived as a domain unto itself; speed and bravado trump courtesy and caution in a mad chariot race towards millions of individual destinations. It is a matter of prestige to cut off rather than to be cut off – as if routes were noses and motor vehicles were swords. Police, singly or in small groups, stand back in awe as unquestionably equal, king-of-the-road, socially-blind drivers create bizarrely intricate traffic jams. If the officers were guaranteed a handsome profit from acts of prevention, all of Istanbul's traffic problems could be avoided.

The proposed solution, because it directly affects their precious pocketbooks, is the only one guaranteed to succeed with drivers and police in Istanbul. Because of the lack of rapid public transportation, there are far too many cars with no passengers, countless slow buses filled to bursting, minibuses scuttling to and from curbs, taxis trolling for custom, and trucks of every imaginable size competing for attention and space. It is best that the price for this particular type of "vehicular disobedience" in Istanbul be paid in hard currency. In this city where one is always required to drive aggressively, cruel punishment coupled with an appeal to avarice is in no way an unacceptable solution. In Istanbul, rampant everyday moving violations include backing up from on-ramps or off-ramps, changing lanes without signaling or purpose, tailgating, driving while talking on a mobile phone, going the wrong way down a one-way street, and swerving into the oncoming lane to avoid the ever-present potholes. When these acts of carelessness are added to widespread stationary traffic violations such as triple-parking, parallel parking across three angled slots, and stopping along highways to answer calls of nature, only immediate and drastic measures can be expected to achieve results.

With the eyes of the world on Istanbul as it hosts the 2010 Capitals of Culture celebrations, the city's resources will be taxed to the limit. However, the city's income from tourism should soar. It is only fair that fines and rewards be used to solve Istanbul's traffic problems quickly; moreover, it is the only viable solution.

Works Cited

Franklin, Benjamin. QuoteDB Web Site. 16 November 2007

<<http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/1007>>.